

**Blue and Green: In it for the Long Haul?:
A Political Ecology Look Into Labor-Environment Coalitions**

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Environment or Jobs: Pick One

After World War II national demand for lumber increased. Logging companies foraged deeper and deeper into rich forests of the Pacific Northwest, felling trees over a thousand years old. Logging communities formed around this flourishing industry, developing permanent residence areas tied to the strong logging culture. By 1988 the Pacific Northwest was providing one third of the nation's timber and scientists increasingly noticed alarming shifts in the forests' ecosystems. As depletion of the forests intensified, especially during the Reagan administration, environmentalists became radically more vehement about the protection of the forests. At the height of this conflict in the mid 1990s, environmentalists tied themselves to trees and filed law suits while laborers organized entourages of trucks stretching several miles long to protests for job preservation. This clash culminated in 1994 when Clinton set a cap on old-growth timber harvesting, designated spotted owl reserves as off limits to logging and set aside economic aid to compensate and help transition effected workers in preparation for new jobs. However, the involved parties were not appeased. Environmentalists derided the plan as inadequate for the protection of wildlife and unions projected that over 90,000 workers were left unaccounted for in Clinton's reimbursement calculations. Needless to say, animosity between environmentalist and loggers persisted. (Rose, 2000)

This situation exemplifies the precedence of deep-rooted tensions between labor and environmental groups. Historically there has been a predominant notion of an inevitable tradeoff between jobs and the environment; chose one or the other because you cannot sanction both. Environmental protection inherently means prioritizing wildlife and ecosystems over jobs. Creating and preserving jobs inherently leads to the depletions of natural resources and reckless polluting. In this paper I argue that distorted perceptions of each other's motives have gotten in the way of meaningful coalition building. Environment and labor are consistently associated with "leftist" politics and often face a common enemy (government, corporations), but an instilled sense of antagonism has kept them from working together. I believe that political ecology plays a valuable role in bridging this fundamental disconnect and identifying favorable conditions for coalition building within the current political climate.

Throughout the past two decades there has been a proliferation of labor-environment alliances (D Foster, personal communication, November, 20, 2006). In this paper I will analyze different elements that foster coalition building between labor and environmental groups in the United States. Under what pretenses are they coming together? Have they been successful? Have they formed alliances with a long-term binding vision? Or have past alliances been merely marriages of conveniences? Through two case studies, I will use political ecology to look at the broader context of these alliances and determine their implications for successful coalition building.

I will start off with a discussion of my methods followed by an introduction to political ecology, a discourse valuable for transcending superficial notions of the environment versus jobs tradeoff. Then, I will use a political ecology lens to give brief

histories of the labor and environmental movements which show their shared trend of decline and various factors that have kept these two movements apart. Using the social movement and environmental identity thesis, I will go on to describe why it is necessary for them to work together in coalitions. I use two case studies to portray two different organizing approaches of labor-environment coalitions due to the different organizing climates at the time. My first case study occurs under the united activist fronts of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle and the second under a heightened sense of urgency spurred by changing notions of the gravity of climate change. After, I will discuss the potential and restrictions of the two organizations. I conclude with my assessment of and suggestions for the sustainability of the direction of this movement.

Methodology

In search of a comprehensive perspective on labor-environment coalitions, I conducted my research through various venues. The political ecology framework employed in numerous articles and books by social movement theorists shaped my interpretations of research material obtained for this paper. Much of the background information comes from labor scholars who continually analyze, theorize and support the labor movement but usually aren't laborers or organizers themselves. The environmental background came from reflections of environmental activists on their experiences and historical analysis of environmental legislation. Information for the case studies was obtained from the pertinent organizations' websites, news articles and editorials. I also relied on accounts from involved activists to better inform my analysis of these

movements in the form of books or memoirs by participating activists and four interviews. Two of my key interviewees came from labor oriented backgrounds: Lynn Hinkle of the United Autoworkers (UAW) and Dave Foster from the United Steelworkers (USW) and two were rooted in environmental work: Joshua Davis of the Northstar Chapter of the Sierra Club, and Brett Smith, environmental academic and community activist on the board of the Blue-Green Alliance committee formed by the Sierra Club.

Each of these informants currently hold leadership positions in the Minnesota Branch of the Blue-Green Alliance, but have very different levels of involvement. While Foster and Davis are two of the three paid staff of the national Blue-Green Alliance, Davis just started working on this campaign in November after the 2006 elections and this is his first time working with the labor movement. Foster, on the other hand has been an advocate for labor and environmental protection since the 1970's and focuses his activism on national and international organizing. Hinkle has a similar activist record to Foster but has mainly acted on a local scale. He was extremely helpful in elucidating a tangible long term vision of joint labor and environmental action in St. Paul. Foster provided me with information on the inner workings of the two organizations discussed in my case studies and insight on the current climate of labor-environmental coalitions in the U.S.. Smith was key in my understanding of the Blue-Green Alliance's place within the Sierra Club and how it is valued within the organization. He also highlighted potential of proposed Blue-Green Alliance projects in Minnesota.

"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" –John Muir (Brooks et al, 2004, p. 4)

Political Ecology: Transcending the Job-Environment Binary

Although laden with definitions and interpretations of what political ecology is,

political ecologist Michael Watts identifies it as the study of

the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods.” (Watts, 2000, p. 257)

This conjoining of “nature and society” or “environmental health and sustainable livelihoods” into a confluent relationship is unique to political ecology and makes it particularly valuable for examining the dynamics of labor and environmentalist interactions. Within “single-issue” discourse of business unionism and “green-washed” environmentalismⁱ there has been limited drive towards more broad, forward-looking discussion. Political ecology offers opportunity to look deeper into intricate connections that have previously been dismissed.

Using political ecology to examine the friction between labor and environmentalists reveals that there are many factors contributing to tensions that go beyond the dominant narrative of an environment versus jobs tradeoff. I will address two of what I believe to be the most encompassing and significant factors that have brought about this perception: political pressure to assume parochial agendas on the part of both movements, and distinct class difference.

Labor on the Defensive: Default to Business Unionism

In the mid 1950’s, organized labor was at it’s peak with 35% of the workforce unionized (Ness, 2003). Fifty years later union density reached a postwar low of 13.5% in the public sector and only 9% in the private sector (Hurd et al, 2003). This decline of the

ⁱ These two terms (business unionism and greenwashed environmentalism) are explained in the next two sections.

labor movement can be attributed to a growing national disapproval of unionism which is backed by employer favoring policy.

In the midst of the Great Depression and flurry of New Deal programs, supported by the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) pushed the Wagner Act (or the National Labor Relations Act of 1935). This act recognized the right of workers to organize, created a regulatory framework for union representation in elections, and established that collective bargaining and strikes were managed by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The Wagner Act was seen as a major victory for unions in the U.S., however it was short-lived. Employers complained that it favored workers too much, so, upon the death of FDR and the Republican take-over of congress, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act was passed which severely restricted the activities and power of labor unions. Shaken by this loss, unions urgently organized to get Democrats back in power. Harry S. Truman's "surprise victory" in the 1948 election set precedence for labor-backed politics for progressive leaders like (Minnesota's own) Hubert Humphrey, who symbolized labor's strong support of the civil rights movement, in the following generation. This alliance was enhanced when, in 1955, the CIO rejoined the American Federation of Labor (AFL), forming the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) which is now one of the largest umbrella union organizations today. (Levi, 2003)

However, while bases were expanding, unions fell into a mode of business unionism in which leaders focused on material gains for members over issues that effect the working class as a whole (Levi, 2003). Members starting becoming disengaged in the labor movement, using unions more as vehicles for individual leverage. By the 1970s the

economic foundation of business unionism had vanished (Rose, 2000). When economic stagnation hit the country, corporations started sacrificing workers rights for better profits; anti-union sentiment has dominated the booming US economy ever since.

Labor took some of its biggest blows in history during the Reagan administration. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan fired 13,000 striking air traffic controllers and obliterated their union. He also hired officials on to the NLRB who believed that "unionized labor relations have been the major contributors to the decline and failure of once-healthy industries" and have caused "destruction of individual freedom." In an effort to initiate a "war on unions" he aggressively cut social and military spending, attempted to lower the minimum wage for younger workers, ease child labor and anti-sweatshop laws, tax fringe benefits, cut back job training programs for the unemployed, and replace federal employees with temporary workers. (Newman, 2006)

Since this brunt of attack, union busting has become a multibillion dollar industry and the labor movement has not had any governmental support (Rose, 2000). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed under President Bill Clinton in 1993, paving the way for more free trade agreements which further defied worker sovereignty and President George W. Bush has also retracted many labor protection policies including a federal version of paycheck security and the federal labor-management partnership (Hurd et al, 2003). As political leaders scramble to globalize the American economy, the voice of workers has faded into a non-descript background. Unions operate defensively and less as parts of a movement with clear goals.

Brian K. Obach (2004), a well-read labor scholar, fits labor into a "treadmill of production framework." He explains that

within capitalist democracies, labor, capital and the state together represent social forces that generate both the means and will to perpetuate an ever-expanding system of production that threatens to deplete resources, disrupt ecosystems, and ultimately destroy the material foundation upon which all life and society are based. (p. 337)

Within this advancing treadmill of production there are no checks for ecological ruin.

The state facilitates economic expansion by encouraging movement of capital. Laborers do the ground work to perpetuate this cycle with a vested self-interest in getting a piece of the accumulating wealth. Incorporation of environmental externalities would be inefficient and limit ability to compete, therefore inhibiting economic growth and slowing down all components of the production system.

However, Obach argues that labor is not inherently environmentally destructive. The dominating anti-unionist political climate has forced unions to adopt a narrow labor agenda that fits into the treadmill of production framework. This agenda, which I refer to as business unionism, has limited labor discourse to the confines of individual membership. Lack of political support has pushed labor away from using the political system to meet its needs and towards a “point of production” based approachⁱⁱ, which will inevitably result in short-term solutions to deeper structural problems (Ness, 2003). This has prevented the working class from thinking as a social movement that can work together with other social movements and instead has made it operate as fragmented “special-interest groups”.

A Similar Lapse: Single-Issue Environmentalism

The environmental movement can be viewed as taking a similarly parochial approach to activism. It is more difficult to pin down a cohesive history of the

ⁱⁱ “Point of production” implies that union members deal with their problems solely where they see them happening: at the immediate work place (Ness, 2003).

environmental movement than the labor union movement as one of its largest problems has been its disjointed member-base which has conflicting prioritiesⁱⁱⁱ.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s environmental legislation hit the national policy arena for the first time. The Clean Air Act was passed in 1963 and expanded in 1970. In 1964 Wilderness Act was passed, establishing a process for permanently protecting some lands from development. These were followed most notably by the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1969, to ensure that

the continuing policy of the Federal Government...use all practicable means and measures...to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans. (Environmental Protection Agency, 1969)

The EPA then went on to pass the Endangered Species Act (1969) and the Clean Water Act (1977). (EcoTopiaUSA, 2005)

The 1968 first image of earth from space marked an era of advanced and accessible technology that heightened awareness of the planet as a singular system. This catalyzed momentum for the modern environmental movement which manifested most publicly at the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. All over the country two million students, teachers, and American residents participated in demonstrations to peacefully advocate for environmental reform. Organizers aimed to educate and mobilize a broad environmental constituency (Brooks et al, 2004). While much potential seemed to coalesce in the wake of this new “holiday,” many people believe it was lost on trivial “clean up trash” and recycling campaigns (Nordhaus, Shellenberg, 2005).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is not to say that labor movement history is straight-forward; it is not, the same critiques apply within the labor movement as well, however, unlike the environmental movement it’s members are united by a common work place or occupation whereas this is not necessarily the case with environmentalism. Needless to say, the histories of both the labor movement and environmental movement have been condensed and simplified in this paper, in order to convey an overall trend that coincides with one another.

Environmentalists' momentum experienced more setbacks in the 1980s when the Reagan administration slashed budgets for environmental programming. Reagan stigmatized environmentalists as extremist and irrational. To avoid these negative connotations, environmentalists started framing themselves as conservationists "devoted to preserving and protecting" (Brooks et al, 2004). By the 1990s passionate environmentalism was slipping away. The 1990 Earth Day was organized by major corporations and advertised on the side of shopping bags. Corporate methods of green-washing proliferated and membership of environmental organizations declined drastically (Rose, 2000).^{iv}

A new brand of environmentalism sprouted at the National People of Color Leadership Summit in 1991 called environmental justice. This movement illuminated the strong correlation between proximity of hazardous environmental conditions and minority groups. I believe that the environmental justice movement served as an important wake-up call for a movement which had traditionally resisted linking ecological agendas with the socioeconomic needs of marginalized people. However, because of the increasingly corporate nature of environmentalism, mainstream environmentalism refrained from internalizing environmental justice issues at their core.

In "The Death of Environmentalism," authors Shellenburger and Nordhaus (2005) assert that "the environmental community's narrow definitions of its self-interest lead to a kind of policy literalism that undermines its power," (p. 7). They trace the movements failure back to booming confidence in the 1960s and 70s saying that "at the height of the movements success...the seeds of failure were planted"; people believed that

^{iv} Membership in the Wilderness Society went down by 30%, the Sierra Club by 21% and Greenpeace by 68%, forcing these environmental organizations to close offices all around the country (Rose, 2000).

“environmental protection framing was enough to succeed at a policy level,” (p. 7) when it really pushed the movement to operate at an unsustainable, single-issue trajectory.

Environmentalists have reverted to thinking of the environment as a “thing” instead of a component in a dynamic eco-system that interacts with all segments of life.

(Shellenburger and Nordhaus, 2005)

Obach (2004) goes as far as to say that the environmental movement has become part of the treadmill itself. It has shied away from confrontation with big industries and focused campaigns on less controversial places like public space (which in the end is inherently tied with big industry anyway). The issue of capitalist driven environmental destruction is extremely pertinent to environmental movements, but environmentalists have failed to differentiate between physically enacting destruction from the people coordinating and creating the need for it. Because of these limited perceptions environmentalist have been unable to sympathize with the worker’s struggle. A large part of this disconnect can be attributed to distinct class differences.

A Homogenous Class-Base

Many environmentalists have viewed unions as “misguided, ignorant of the science of forest ecosystems, shortsighted, unsophisticated, simplistic in their concerns and destroyers of nature,” (Rose, 2000, p. 47). One disgruntled union member from Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce comments, “environmentalists want to obstruct business from legally operating in this state. Their real agenda is to run business out of the state, kill jobs and force our families to check out of modern life,” (Brooks et al, 2004, p. 15). Labor scholar Fred Rose (2000) depicts the environmentalist reputation as

“residents who have destroyed their lands...and want to protect vacation lands at expense of rural communities. Their desire for protection is irrational and religious,”(p. 45). These negative perceptions of the two groups can be attributed to differences in class that prevent clear communication and frequent interaction between labor and environmental groups.

Both movements’ membership is extremely class based: the labor movement consists of the working class and the environmental movement is primarily made up of the middle to upper class. This has different implications for levels of access to power and opportunities in society. The environmental movement is largely supported by volunteer members and donors. Past studies have found that an average of 60% of members of environmental movements are made up of educated professionals such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, sometimes even corporate executives, etc., whose jobs rely on intellectual abilities (Rose, 2000).^v By contrast, one’s involvement in the labor movement is job dependent and people are paid to organize. Working-class jobs usually involve manual and repetitive labor and structurally regimented days. Due to different lifestyle demands each class develops different values, priorities, and political, economic and social outlooks, hence have different approaches to organizing. Working-class organizing is hierarchical and tends to seek change around perceived immediate interests of members (largely because of the embedded business unionism mentality) which is often framed in terms of economic well-being. The middle-class is usually more receptive to organizing around universal and immaterial goods and moralistic framing. Decisions are made through slow paced, consensus-based processes. (Rose, 2000)

^v A common critique of mainstream environmentalism is that often, people that have the money to consider themselves environmentalists are in fact the very employers that laborers are struggling against.

Single class movements are problematic because they often inadvertently perpetuate the very inequalities that they oppose and that cause class division in the first place. Each group has goals that are only transparent within the movement (at best). This leaves little space for acknowledgement of the inter-related nature of most issues and results in miscommunication often creating an unwarranted sense of rivalry among groups.

What is Changing?: The Social Movement and Environmental Identity Thesis

One labor advocate predicts that the

emerging relationship between labor unions and environmentalists is likely to strengthen. Politics has put these two into a symbiotic relationship, and the bonds between them are apt to become increasingly tight and intertwined, as strong as those that propelled labor unions towards socialism in the early years of the last century. (Ellis, 2006, p. 5)

But why is this happening now? In this section I will discuss why these two movements are aligning their efforts, first through political ecology social movement and environmental identity theory which will lead into a discussion of the national climate right now.

Given the general dwindling status of both movements and homogenous class base, a different approach needs to be taken. Many activists have proclaimed that the key to reviving these insular movements lies in building coalitions with broader social movements (Stillerman, 2003), or as one organizer puts it “if you’re going to the top of the mountain, don’t go naked and don’t go alone,” (Burkey, 1993, p. 174). Working together to address larger social concerns and environmental protection would slow down the proverbial treadmill of production to make room for quality of life issues and higher levels of grassroots agency. Although there is much theory on the benefits of coalition

building, there is not much empirical research on conditions in which it works best (Townsend-Bell, 2006).

Political ecology plays a pivotal role in explicating the significance of coalition building. Political ecologist Paul Robbins (2004) unites political ecology discourse through four themes: degradation and marginalization, environmental conflict, conservation and control and social movements and environmental identity. All of these themes are inextricably connected, but the social movement and environmental identity (SMEI) thesis has been most helpful for me in providing insight into the complexities and progress of environment-labor coalitions.^{vi} Robbins' SMEI thesis says that:

Changes in environmental management regimes and environmental conditions have created opportunities or imperatives for local groups to secure and represent themselves politically. Such movements often represent a new form of political action, since the ecological strands connect disparate groups across class, ethnicity and gender. In this way, local social/environmental conditions and interactions have delimited, modified, and blunted otherwise apparently powerful global political and economic forces. (p. 188-189)

Shifts in governance and environmental awareness are broader factors that solicit concern from groups regardless of their personal affiliations. Relative peaks of urgency culminate in coalition building across diverse groups of people. New Social Movement (NSM) theorists also believe that rapid globalization and decline of the nation-state has fostered a climate in which groups must unite under collective identities. Identities are constructed and fluid therefore a social movement must work to establish exactly what its identity is while it is forming. Inherent in the process of the constructing a group identity is the development of a group political consciousness which informs the bounds of group interest (Townsend-Bell, 2006).

Rose (2000) explains that

^{vi} Robbins' other themes can be equally valuable in examining this topic, but out of my own interest I have picked the environmental identity and social movement thesis as a lens for this paper.

working- and middle-class coalitions provide a context for class-segregated movements to learn from their differences and to develop a common agenda worthy of broad community support. These coalitions have the potential to overcome the narrow limits of issue politics and to create a broad, inclusive movement for social change. (p. 9)

Coalitions with non-dominant classes are less likely to reproduce forms of oppression that are often exacerbated in single class movements. The act of alliance building itself creates an untraditional space of interclass exchange where people can learn from each other and merge their goals to envision more holistic change.

Currently, I believe that there are specifically two pressing issues under national spotlight that have illuminated the need for environmental and labor coalitions: trade liberalization and climate change. As international trade is increasingly liberalized and forces corporations/companies to operate in a highly competitive global market, in their efforts to survive and profit, labor rights (wages, standards, and working conditions) along with environmental responsibility (low regulation standards) are compromised. Also, with heightened projections of the devastating impact that climate change will have on livelihoods and ecosystems, the detrimental effects of energy consumption and irresponsible production seem more urgent.

The global nature of these issues has made old nation-based single issue organizing obsolete and fostered the need for a new kind of organizing, one with an emphasis on linking issues and social and environmental movements into deeper relationships. In the following sections I will give backgrounds on these issues and how they affect each movement through two case studies. Then, I will explain why working together is necessary but difficult to enact sustainably.

Seattle and the Alliance For Sustainable Jobs and the Environment: The Remnants

From November 28 to December 3, 1999 an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 protestors from all over the world and over 100 organizations gathered in the pouring rain outside of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Building in Seattle. The crowd ranged from people dressed in superhero and turtle costumes^{vii} to French farmers, young anarchists and well-tread activists in their 80s, all assembling to oppose the WTO's promulgation of corporate-led globalization (Berg, 2003). General demands from the protesters were: to retract China's admission into the WTO, abolish WTO trade related intellectual property agreements, restore each nation's rights to make decisions about goods sold in its domestic markets, allow individual nations to set their own environment, health and labor standards, and exclude water and biological forms of life from being patented and traded (Cockburn, St Clair, 2000).

Protesters succeeded in shutting down the WTO's third annual ministerial round of trade negotiations, but not without copious amounts of police brutality and arrests. While this prevention of the negotiations was an accomplishment in itself, Seattle is perhaps most renowned for the strong presence of diversity within the crowd and its ability to unite groups that had never been together before under the simple motto: "a better world is possible." Many activists refer to this "Seattle Coalition" as an indicator of a new type of social movement, one that "indisputably politicized capitalism and globalization...and was not just against ravages of globalization but for global justice," (Hayduk, 2003, 20).

From various accounts of protesters, it seems that one of the most "intriguing" and "surprising" alliances forged was the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the

^{vii} The Earth Island Institute brought 500 sea turtle costumes to the protest resembling the WTO rejection of a call to block imports of shrimp caught in nets that killed 150,000 sea turtles each year, on the grounds that the block was "arbitrary and unjustified." (Berg, 2003)

Environment (ASJE) (Cockburn, St Clair, 2000). On the third day of protests, David Brower, founder of EarthFirst! and Dave Foster, District 11 director of the United Steelworkers (USW), publicly announced the formation of ASJE. EarthFirst!, an environmental organization with a reputation for using radical tactics of direct action, was formed in 1979 “in response to an increasingly corporate, compromising and ineffective environmental community, ” and asserts that “is not an organization, but a movement,”(EarthFirst! Worldwide, 2006). The USW is the largest industrial labor union in North America, with over 1.2 million active and retired workers in membership (United Steelworkers, 2006), and has a reputation for being one of the most progressive unions in the nation. ASJE originally formed in 1993 to oppose NAFTA but lost momentum after the defeat. It regrouped five years later to unsuccessfully counter fast track legislation^{viii} of the Bush administration and to preemptively organize the framework for the Seattle demonstrations (Hurd et al, 2003).^{ix}

At the demonstrations Brower and Foster explained that they had come together in the face of a common enemy: the Maxxam Corporation and its CEO Charles Hurwitz. Hurwitz was in the process of taking over the Pacific Lumber Company— owner of the largest private plot of old-growth redwoods, and Kaiser Aluminum— an aluminum company that had, during the takeover, locked out over 3000 striking steelworkers in three cities (Cockburn, St Clair, 2000). While Maxxam provides a clear instance of blatant denigrations of jobs and environment, Foster emphasizes that this extends beyond just one corporation: “that foe [is] more than Hurwitz; it’s the kind of global capitalism

^{viii} Fast Track legislation speeds up the process for passing bilateral trade agreements through setting time limits to negotiations and limiting the amount of Congress’ input in the final decision.

^{ix} Upon the announcement of the ASJE, Brower and Foster ran a full pager ad in New York Times which read: “Have you heard the one about the environmentalist and the steelworker?” (Cockburn, St Clair, 2000))

that exploits both workers and the environment” (Cockburn, St Clair, 2000, p. 9). By using the WTO as another face of the enemy just like Hurwitz, ASJE would take things further than the past “marriage of convenience” relationships that labor and environmental groups traditionally held, to encompass a deeper opposition to structurally based marginalization.

This greater foe, the WTO, which currently has 150 member countries, was established in 1995 to supplement to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), an agreement that worked to decrease barriers to international trade. The WTO was formed to institutionalize this agreement as an international authority on trade. GATT became a section of WTO that is now called General Agreement and Trade in Service (GATS). While many components of the WTO have serious impacts on labor and the environment, GATS is seen as one of the most dire. GATS contains a broad definition of what constitutes a service—anything from telecommunications and banking to education and health care—and applies to all government actions of any government in the WTO at any level (Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, 2002). If a country is part of the WTO it cannot prioritize its “service providers” over any other country’s in terms of protection or consumption. Resources are fair game and up for privatization by anyone and so are public services, which often means fewer rules mandating fair benefits, conditions and wages for workers. Corporations are free to outsource jobs to places where production cost is cheaper and labor laws are susceptible to being standardized and loosened if seen to “adversely affect the competitiveness of foreign suppliers” (Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, 2002, p. 11). Needless to say, GATS severely inhibits a government’s ability to make any unilateral

decision particularly in terms of regulating business behavior and protecting the environment and workers rights, especially when, according to the Office of United States Trade Representative, services account for 80% of U.S. employment. (Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, 2002)

Largely due to momentum from the Seattle protests, ASJE succeeded in driving Kaiser Aluminum out of business through a series of indictments from the federal government. Kaiser went bankrupt and Maxxam lost control of the company. Now, the union has a much larger say in the decision making process of the company; union members comprise of 50% of the company's board. Through lawsuits, publicity campaign, accountability committees ASJE worked to pressure the corporations to change their behavior. This set a new multifaceted model for opposing corporate power beyond striking. (D Foster, personal communication, November, 20, 2006)

ASJE also organized many educational campaigns on impending trade agreements, including mobilizing people to go down to Miami, in 2003 to oppose the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). However, even though the organization has been relatively active, its scope has scaled down significantly. It now operates as a local coalition in Eureka, California rather than its proposed national alliance. It is working to expand through an associated membership plan, but this is a slow process. (D Foster, personal communication, November, 20, 2006)

So, while the WTO represented grave threats of regression for EarthFirst! and the USW at Seattle, this did not necessarily translate to a coalition with endured support from these two expansive founding organizations. One explanation of this loss of national momentum can be attributed to the highly urgent "war on terrorism" that emerged after 9-

11. This “war” had similar effects to that of the Red Scare on labor movements in the 1920s. It forced them to shift organizing strategies so as not to seem anti-patriotic, when often these fundamental strategies were the ones that had united the groups in the first place (Gould et al, 2004). Dave Foster reflects,

After Seattle I thought we were entering into an era of protest. 9-11 sucked the air out of social protest weakening the movement. Global labor and environmental groups need to come together to describe the model that solves this problem and be the ‘voice of clarification.’ We are slowly recovering; I think Iraq is playing a big role in showing the connectedness between the global economy and democratic reform. (D Foster, personal communication, November, 20, 2006)

Although there have been demonstrations in opposition to trade agreements and WTO rounds all around the world, for example, the Miami protests further delayed the FTAA, arguably, none have created as resounding impressions as did the protests in Seattle.

“If you think it was strange to see Teamsters and Turtles marching side-by-side at the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, check this out.” (Grant, 2006)

The Blue-Green Alliance: A New Wave of Coalitions

The dissipation of ASJE did not mean disappearance of its leaders. In fact, Dave Foster seems to be behind most labor-environment coalitions in the U.S.. In this case study I will examine the approaches of Foster’s most recent project: The Blue-Green Alliance^x which uses issues of energy to unite labor and environmental groups.

As apocalyptic films of an all consuming frost thrive in ticket offices^{xi} and Al Gore tours the country educating the public on the woes of climate change, the debate around climate change shifts away from quandaries of *does it exist?* to *when will it occur?* and *what can be done?*. Climate change is becoming the buzz in international

^x Blue represents labor, and green- environmentalists.

^{xi} This alludes to the 2004 box office hit *The Day After Tomorrow* which portrays climate change as an aggressive and fatal frost that wipes out half of the U.S.

forums as one issue that no one can evade. When the U.S., a country that contributes to over 25% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (United Steelworkers of America, 2002), did not pass the Kyoto Protocol in 2004 many grassroots organizations and environmental groups were outraged. The Kyoto Protocol aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions of the signed countries back to 1990 emission levels by 2013 (Nordhaus, Shellenberger, 2005). The U.S.'s failure to sign was a serious setback for the agreement in terms of its anticipated effect. In response, many states all over the U.S. have symbolically signed on to the agreement in spite of federal abstention.

Labor and environmental groups have also recognized the need to take things into their own hands. A report compiled by USW (2002) states that "An unregulated global economy that increases the gap between rich and poor and ignores sound environmental science will ultimately destroy the good jobs and healthy environment that are the legacy of the North American trade union movement" (p. 3). So, on June 7, 2006, amidst the proliferation of dialogue on climate change, the USW and the Sierra Club, the nation's largest grassroots environmental organization with 800,000 members, came together as the Blue-Green Alliance to "strategically pursue a joint public policy agenda under the banner of Good Jobs, A Clean Environment, and a Safer World." (Blue Green Alliance, 2006).

This alliance incorporates four pilot states: Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Ohio, and Washington and plans to expand to at least ten more states by 2008. It is headquartered in Minneapolis, MN at the USW District 11 office under the Executive Directorship of Dave Foster. At the alliance's official press conference Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, announced:

We have reached a point in the development of global economy where we can either use our planet's resources for long-term sustainability or to create an ever more dangerous polarization of wealth and poverty. Our new alliance allows us to address the great challenge of the 21st century- how to provide good jobs, a clean environment and a safer world. This is the most important environmental statement to be issued by any trade union in North America...by reaching across divides of class and geography, the Sierra Club and Steelworkers are showing there is another way. (United Steelworkers, 2006)

This "other way" is laid out by the Apollo Alliance, a larger umbrella labor-environment organization, in its "Ten-Point Plan for Good Jobs and Energy Independence," which aims to:

promote advanced technology and hybrid cars, invest in more efficient factories, encourage high performance building, increase use of energy efficient appliances, modernize electrical infrastructure, expand renewable energy development, improve transportation options, reinvest in smart urban growth, plan for a hydrogen future and preserve regulatory protections. (Apollo Alliance, 2006)

These components embody the Blue-Green Alliance's overall vision of a "green economy" (L Hinkle, personal communication, October, 23, 2006). Leaders of the Blue-Green Alliance assert that, contrary to previous notions, shifting the economy towards green production will create more jobs. In 2000, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report calculated that from 1970-2000 layoffs due to environmental regulations averaged from 1,000-3,000 workers per year, while economy-wide layoffs were over two million workers a year (Renner, 2000). The Blue-Green Alliance projects that investments in renewable energies have the potential to create over three million jobs (United Steelworkers, 2002).

In Minnesota, the Blue-Green Alliance plans to spur a profitable green economy through the green conversion of manufacturing plants. Minnesota used to be part of the region known as the Steel Belt because of the massive amount of people employed in steel based manufacturing jobs, but due to rapid globalization over the past couple decades manufacturing jobs have become scarce and many people have starting referring to

the region as the “rust belt” (Jobs with Justice, 2000).^{xii} This has recently become more dire due to Ford’s new revitalization plan called “The Way Forward” which calls for laying off 30,000 American workers which means shutting down around nine Ford assembly plants. The 82 year old St. Paul Ford Plant, which employs 1965 workers, was initially thought to be immune to Ford’s downscales because it is basically powered for free by cheap hydro-power from the Mississippi River^{xiii}. However, in April 2006, the Ford Plant announced that it will be shutting down within the next year. Since then, many of the United Autoworker (UAW) Local 879 leaders have become involved in the Blue-Green Alliance and are using this as a positive opportunity to transform the Ford Plant into something more sustainable. (L Hinkle, personal communication, October, 23, 2006)

Health and Safety officer of Local 879, Lynn Hinkle, explains that,

The green conversion of the Ford Plant is a really easy way for other people to get complex ideas quickly: sustainable non carbon energy, green products and a work force that supports community sustaining wages. These are wages and benefits that sustain families and communities in an economic fabric. A key part of green manufacturing is looking at the lifecycle of a product. The whole economy will have to be converted to green production. And we’ve become one of the ways to get that idea in front of people. Green conversion is not just a good idea for Ford, it’s what we have to do: colleges, every part of society has to be clear about that and more jobs will be created. (L Hinkle, personal communication, October, 23, 2006)

In a green conversion proposal to the Ford Plant, Hinkle conveys that “Minnesota’s timely alignment would clearly impact the creation of this green plant-green product global model” for all over the country (United Autoworkers, 2006). Minnesotans are hoping to spark the trend towards a nation-wide green economy through the gradual green conversion of factories.

^{xii} Jobs with Justice (2000) calculated in 2000, that since NAFTA 13,000 Minnesotans lost their jobs due to outsourcing.

^{xiii} The plant is powered from the Mississippi’s Lock & Dam #1, also known as the Ford Dam.

A crucial element of the shift to green conversion will be ensuring a just transition. One laborer cautions that “environmental measures that do not recognize a worker’s right to a fair chance in the new economy are equally menacing to our future,” (Renner, 2000, p. 64). Hinkle explains that “just transition involves taking care of these communities. You can’t just say [to the workers] you’re going to give them unemployment; you need to retrain.” The Blue-Green Alliance’s ability to retrain the current workforce will be an measure of the depth and commitment of this environment-labor relationship. (L Hinkle, personal communication, October, 23, 2006)

In light of the political party shift of the November 2006 elections, Foster and Hinkle believe that the most feasible immediate step will be to pass more stringent renewable energy standards in Minnesota modeled after California’s energy initiatives (D Foster, personal communication, November, 20, 2006). The green conversion of individual factories will be a longer process of educating citizens and convincing businesses of the economic incentives that come with green investments. There seems to be a shaky balance within the Blue-Green Alliance between taking policy-based approaches which (it is implied) will spur economic incentives that will promote a green shift, versus a private sector approach which will inherently exert pressure to change public policy.

The Blue-Green Alliance staff member at the Sierra Club, Joshua Davis, plans to use this alliance as an opportunity to push for a desirable outcome in the 2008 Presidential elections without directly referring to the candidates. He believes that “if we can’t pass supporting legislation, we’re not doing all that we can to protect the

environment and unions,” (J Davis, personal communication, November 17, 2006).

Foster remarks that

What’s most interesting that the Blue-Green Alliance brings to this discussion is that the way to look at this is not from this point of view of economic sacrifice but of economic opportunity. The way of changing things is through opportunity; this represents the possibility of democratizing moments in human history. (D Foster, personal communication, November 20, 2006)

Preservation of a strong industrial sector with vast employment capacity is at the core of Foster and Hinkle’s advocacy; electing the right candidate is more of a means to this goal whereas, for Davis it seems to be a primary motivation.

Discussion

In these two case studies I have highlighted two different circumstances of unification between labor and environmentalists. Pent up anguish from WTO’s oppressive trade policy brought laborers and environmentalists to the streets of Seattle in shared rage. The ASJE thrived off of this unprecedented level of energy taking the form of what was speculated to be a new type of social movement which embraced commonalities to defeat a mutual enemy. However, after accomplishing its immediate goals of thwarting the clout of the Maxxam Corporation, its broader vision of restricting institutionalized corporate power subsided. ASJE was scaled down to a local organization, instead of an enduring movement, and the emergence of joint trade policy activism could be seen as just a passing trend in social movement history. A war on terror also materialized “conveniently” in time to shove growing liberal movements to the margins of socio-political attention (Gould et al, 2004).

Several years later, a new wave of labor-environment coalitions have emanated from a different kind of fear. Climate change mustered a need for immediate

environmentally sound action that doesn't further compromise endangered livelihoods. Instead of attacking an institution, labor and environmentalists are coming together to promote clean energy— a tangible technical solution to this universal problem. The Blue-Green Alliance frames its movement as a positive opportunity to redirect and “revitalize” a tyrannical global economy. It is too early to tell if this is just another short-lived narrative in social movement history, however, I question if the vision of a green economy will lead labor-environment coalitions in a sustainable direction, one that will harness aspirations of deep-rooted change over temptations towards fleeting accomplishments.

Throughout my research, the different levels of urgency for success became apparent based on the perspective of the person I spoke to. Labor leaders emphasized the interconnectedness of everything and the need to educate people about the concept of one interlinking system to implement change. Unions are, to an extent, putting their livelihoods at stake to promote a green economy, which if played out correctly would create more jobs, whereas this Blue-Green Alliance still seems at the fringe of Sierra Club programming; not having a clear place in its principles as of yet (B Smith, personal communication, November 17, 2006). With this perspective, my question still remains: have these groups really internalized motivations to transcend single-issue and single-class organizing of the past or is this a just a new façade of modern social movements?

Conclusion: Taking it “Outside the Box”

Labor analyst Margaret Levi says that “organized labor is arguably the most effective popular vehicle for achieving a democratic and equitable society,” (Levi 2003,

p. 45). The environmental movement has also played a large role in attempting to keep dominant economic forces in check. Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2005) admit that “the environmental community can claim a great deal of credit for...significant advances won against well-financed campaigns of disinformation and denial,”(p. 2). While it is clear that these two movements have immense potential to promote and embody essential components of social change, labor and environmental movements are highly vulnerable to the sway of political structures. Autonomy within these movements has drastically deteriorated over the past fifty years with the rise of the global economy. In efforts to cope, the labor and environmental movements have operated defensively. Adopting parochial goals and acting individualistically (not thinking beyond immediate membership base) has exacerbated the very weaknesses that these movements are working to reform. Labor and environmental groups have become ineffective players in a modern era of neo-liberalism. In order to survive, these movements must take a more external-based approach, emphasizing collaborative efforts of resistance bound by “ecological strands” that extend across gender, class, and ethnicity (Robbins, 2004). Until each group recognizes that its revival is dependent on the formation of one collective identity, with a collective political consciousness, visions for a more democratic, just and environmentally conscientious world will not materialize sustainably. Political ecology is a promising forum with potential to direct and encompass this discourse towards more holistic long-term goals.

One factor that political ecologists Princen, Maniates, and Conca (2002) identify as not often being taken into account in the arena of sustainable livelihoods and environmental health is the issue of consumption. I believe this stands true in these cases;

when examining the prospects of the Blue-Green Alliance, the shift to clean jobs and renewable energy seems like an important step towards mediating production practices in a rushing “treadmill” economy, but, it does not get at what causes the haste of production. Whether it is the components of the treadmill driving consumption or socially imposed levels of consumption fueling the treadmill is a chicken-and-egg question, but until labor and environmental groups address this ubiquitous force, I do not believe that labor-environment coalitions have a chance at transcending short-term marriage of convenience relationships.

Taking discussion past accessible solutions to “out-of-box questions” that work to envision shifts in lifestyle, not just shifts in equipment and energy use, will more effectively get at tackling the “powerful global political and economic forces” that are alluded to in the SMEI thesis (Princen et al, 2003). It would also help bridge differences in motivations between the two groups that may have been set aside initially to accomplish short-term goals while in the longer run may have hindered further collaboration. Foster comments that this is

one of the big debates that will take place in the coming decade when people realize there’s no choice but to start moving in a different direction because of the consequences of global warming. For me this is an opportunity to try to change the economic model and social view points. (D Foster, personal communication, November 20, 2006)

This paper has contributed to existing political ecology discourse in that it takes historical and contemporary analysis of labor and environment movement trends and applies it to political ecology’s core principles of environmental health and sustainable livelihoods. I identify two main catalyzers of coalition building: trade policy and climate change, both topics frequently examined by political ecologist but not often in this context, especially within case studies of specific first world organizations. The

consumption angle is also an element that is not usually incorporated in labor-environment coalition discourse. I believe that political ecology will play a useful role in leading this discussion in a discerning manner in the future. Another important element of labor-environment coalitions that I did not discuss in this paper is transnational organizing. Nation-based social movements have become obsolete as corporations constantly defy notions allegiance to a particular place. Along with exploring issues of consumption, transnational coalition building will be necessary for holistically addressing structural inequities, therefore, an important area for further political ecology research.

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